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An Eel Soup

Kamini Vellodi

The Surviving Image. Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Art, by Georges Didi-Huberman. Translated by Harvey Mendelsohn. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017. 432 pp.. 93 b&w illus., \$79.95 Hardback. \$34.95 Paperback.

This is a book about haunting, mourning, and the unsettling of art history. It is a book about the force of query, and the implication of the historian in the material he studies.

A magisterial study of Aby Warburg's conception of image, history and time, *The Surviving Image* is the long awaited English translation of the French original, first published in French 2002. It is the sequel to Didi-Huberman's earlier *Confronting Images* (1990), a book that set out to challenge the rationalist, logocentric and Kantian tendencies of the discipline of Art History. In *The Surviving Image*, Warburg is presented as the figure that haunts and unsettles the discipline in its continued retention of such tendencies. An 'unappeased ghost' or *dybbuk*, he is a symptom of what Art History represses, returning at intervals to express something that 'one cannot forget and yet is impossible to recognise clearly' (13).

Warburg remains current, Didi Huberman claims, because the problems that he noted in art history in his time continue to be problems for today's art history. Whilst the targets have shifted – Warburg was critiquing 19th century historicism and 'aestheticizing art history', whereas Didi-Huberman attacks the contextualism returned to the forefront of disciplinary study by social art history – the underlying principles linking these targets are the

same: of rationalism, epistemological-drive, positivism, method, chronological sense, representational thinking – the continued hallmarks of scholarly endeavour.

As such, Didi-Huberman's study of Warburg is much more than a historiographic exercise. It is a symptomatology. Warburg functions as the figure through which one can diagnose, critique, and transform art history and the study of images today. This includes the critique of Art History's own recent integrations of Warburg – for it is clear that Warburg's value has now been well recognised within the discipline. Thus Didi-Huberman asserts, 'Warburg is redoubling his ghostliness at the very moment when everyone is beginning to invoke him as the guardian angel of the most diverse theoretical approaches.' (16). Which is to say, just as Warburg is being held up as the figurehead for the social history of art, hermeneutics, anti-formalism, New Art history, feminist critique, and the ever-expanding field of visual culture, the fundamental evasiveness of Warburg's thought – which correlates to the evasiveness of images themselves - reasserts itself as a reminder of what eternally escapes disciplinary territories. Attending to the power of this 'outside' of thought, via the displacement of art history by the science of images, is one of Didi-Huberman's aims in this extraordinary book.

The book's driving aim is to set out Warburg's philosophy of the anachronic survival of images. Didi-Huberman takes Warburg's conception of the survival [*Nachleben*] of *Pathosformeln* (emotive formula, most famously, of accessory garments in motion), and expands it as a philosophy that attends to the irrational, dynamic life of images. Images are not just facts of history; they are symptoms of historical forces. They are sites of tension, of antitheses that are not resolved or schematised, but which produce an energy that drives the movement of history (194). Survival is a type of persistence that challenges the classification of history into epochs and periods with 'discontinuities and destructions, forced or forgotten connections'.¹ Whilst it is a phenomenon that Warburg associates with the culture of images

in the Renaissance, Didi-Huberman draws attention to the potency of survival as a conceptual tool beyond any specific period. For him, the survival of images offers a counter to the art historian's preoccupation with the ensemble of definite coordinates – author, date, technique, iconography, fact – by which the study of artworks is bound to the attainment of knowledge.

Didi-Huberman takes us on an exhilarating journey through intellectual history to set Warburg's project within the history of ideas. Along the way we meet anthropologists, classical archaeologists, philologists, natural scientists, physiologists, historians, psychoanalysts, even geologists and palaeontologists. All the notable names of the 19th and early 20th centuries make an appearance, and one of Didi Huberman's indubitable strengths is the way he passes effortlessly – although perhaps too quickly - between disparate intellectual milieus. Thus *Nachleben* is contextualised with respect to a host of related notions such as Burkhardt 'vital residue', Nietzsche's 'primitive affective forms' and 'eternal return', Darwin's 'general principles of expression', and Freud's return of the repressed – leaving us in no doubt of the profoundly trans-disciplinary nature of Warburg's concepts.

Unlike previous studies of Warburg's work, such as those by Panofsky, Cassirer, Wind and Gombrich, and the current (in Didi-Huberman's view, misplaced) appeals to a Warburgian 'method' – *The Surviving Image* does not attempt to translate Warburg's nebulous and complex oeuvre into a more digestible format. Instead it affirms it by assuming similar characteristics. Like Warburg's works – many of which survive as fragments and aphoristic sketches, unpublished drafts and tantalising jottings - the *surviving image* is obscure and circular, opening problems rather than providing solutions. Elegiac in tone and aqueous in structure, Didi-Huberman's prose conjures an atmosphere of thought, a tone of query – recalling Warburg's own idea of the *Denkraum* [thought-space]. Far from conventional academic writing, it challenges the reader to leap in time and between semantic registers, demanding an intellectual mobility that forecloses conventional scholarly analysis.

Readers will not find a programme or method for a new art history here. And, no doubt to the chagrin of a certain kind of reader, Didi-Huberman emerges in the wake of Warburg somewhat like a phantom, ‘difficult to follow.’ (333).

The Surviving Image is divided into three chapters - best approached as overlapping variations on a theme rather than linear development of argument - each of which focuses on an aspect of Warburg’s conception of images: the image as phantom (1), the image as pathos (2) and the image as symptom (3).

Chapter 1, ‘The image as phantom: survivals of Forms and impurities of Time’ focuses on Warburg’s conception of time and contextualises the concepts of *nachleben* and *pathosformeln* within 19th century intellectual and cultural history. We are introduced to Warburg indirectly, through the mediating figure of Johann Winkelmann, whose founding of the discipline of art history on ‘the triple knot of antiquity, art and history’ (10) will be crucial for Warburg’s own, albeit utterly contrasting, outlook. Winkelmann is presented as the figure who makes the thinking of art into a grand system, doctrinal and synthetic, moving beyond the curiosity of antiquarians and the chronicling of the plinarian or vasarian type to historical method grounded on analogy and the laws of succession. His rejection of pathos in favour of the Greek ideal of serenity supplies the segway to Warburg, and Didi-Huberman begins his exploration of Warburg with a description of an early lecture that attempted to positively evaluate the very thing Winkelmann rejected – an image of a human being torn apart by extreme physical intensity. Thus Warburg appears as a second beginning for art history, a return of the repressed.

The remainder of this chapter explores the crucial importance of anthropology for Warburg’s detachment of the study of images from the discipline of art history, incorporating his experience of the Hopi snake ritual in New Mexico and his encounter with Edward

Tylor's theory that the survivals of ancient forms constitute a foundational element in any science of culture. Didi-Huberman proceeds to show, via a close reading of Warburg's relation to Burckhardt, how this anthropology of the image impacts Warburg's understanding of the Florentine Renaissance as an 'impure' dialectic of tensions (45) that gives rise to the 'impure time' of survivals. The chapter concludes by arguing how this unconventional approach was exorcised by Warburg's followers – such as Gombrich and Panofsky – and how this subsequent forgetting by art history set up Warburg's status as a repressed symptom, destined to recur.

The most compelling section of Chapter 2 'The image as pathos: lines of Fracture and Formulas of Intensity', is the discussion of Warburg's breakdown and treatment by the great Swiss psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger (who had also treated Nietzsche a while earlier). Didi-Huberman sees Warburg's experience of psychosis as fundamental to his concept of images. He reads Binswanger's diagnosis of Manic-depression as corresponding to Warburg's interest in mixed, impure state of survivals with their 'melange of heterogeneous elements'. Thus, a radical displacement of knowledge about art implies a radical displacement of the scholar himself (84) and the *pathosformeln* of images is inextricably bound to the pathos of the historian. The historian is no longer to be understood as a disinterested master of his object, but a part of his object, tragically implicated by the material he studies. Warburg's fragmented thoughts, swirling around, in his own words, like an 'eel soup' [*aalsuppenstil*] (15, 22) are inseparable from the serpents writhing around Laocoon's tormented body or the snakes of the Hopi rituals. Clearly this is not just an account of how dissolution of mind results in a perception of dissolution. What Didi-Huberman draws attention to is how Warburg transforms his own breakdown into a construction. What matters is how Binswanger succeeded in 'inverting in Warburg's mind the symptom of his thinking to such a degree that it incited, or more accurately, reincited, a thinking about the symptom', allowing

his patient to think about his crises as an experience rather than just a sign of illness. As such, Warburg's personal schism permits him to newly grasp the schism of images (236), bringing new intelligibility to his methods whilst producing a new kind of knowledge capable of transforming the confessions of a schizophrenic into a cultural theory of symbolic schisms.

Chapter 3, *The image as symptom. Fossils in motion and montages of memory* develops the theory of the symptom via a scintillating reading of Freud. Through the concept of the symptom (which is set up here in contrast to the symbols that are readable through iconology), the unconscious is reintegrated into the reading of images. Freud's *symptombildung* allows Warburg to address how survival takes on an 'enigmatic' body agitated by conflicts, contradictory movements, and delayed action (196). Via discussions of Charcot's theory of hysteria, Vischer's theory of empathy and Cassirer's theory of symbolic forms, we finally arrive at the Mnemosyne Atlas – the montage of the migrations of images which for Warburg constituted the entire trajectory of the *pathosformeln*.

These rich chapters fully absorb the reader within Warburg's intoxicating world. However, Didi-Huberman's text, a dense and non-linear mass of ideas, labyrinthine and often repetitive with its endless resurgence of motifs, draws the reader into a web that at times can become unproductively dizzying. When one would like to be taken into the heart of a concept or to linger with an image or particular case-study, we are instead taken laterally, in a breathless passage across the history of ideas that can leave the reader more with the sense of a seductive network of problems than with the philosophical substance of Warburg's thought. The almost feverish presentation of transversal connections between thinkers overwhelms analysis and the slow and patient unravelling demanded by such complex concepts. One result of this is that the milieu of thinkers to which Didi-Huberman refers emerges as somewhat homogeneous – Freud assumes the same importance as Burckhardt and Nietzsche,

Bergson and Tylor - we are left, that is, with little sense of Warburg's own discrimination amongst the mass of theories he encountered.

One would like to see Didi-Huberman's acutely critical eye occasionally directed towards Warburg himself. What were the limits of his project, the problems, failures and inconsistencies of his approach? Instead, he is held up as a redoubtable exemplar: everything he thinks is original, everything in his system is consistent with itself - even his conception of the dialectic. But in this way, does not Didi-Huberman unwittingly restore the sense of a totalising intelligibility, hierarchy of values, and rationale that he claims Warburg's enterprise sets out to challenge?

One of the most intriguing sections of the book is the discussion of the connections between Warburg's concept of survival and Nietzsche's notion of eternal return as read by Gilles Deleuze. Didi-Huberman understands the eternal return not as the return of the same but as the return of 'something similar' (105). But this actually departs from Deleuze's notion of the eternal return as the return of difference, the dissimilar, and the excessiveⁱⁱ. This divergence has philosophical implications concerning the ontology of the new within a philosophy of history, which would have benefited from deeper analysis. For Didi-Huberman, return returns to the form of resemblance, whereas for Deleuze the return of unrecognisable difference destroys the form of resemblance and produces the sense of a time 'out of joint'. For instance, of an image of a fresco from the Italian quattrocento in which we may find the active, surviving phantom of an ancient Arab astrologer, Didi-Huberman may note the resemblance of formal motifs beyond cultural borders, whereas Deleuze would note the irreducible difference conjuring a misrecognition that can not be measured or made intelligible. Didi-Huberman's Warburg is in fact more aligned with Walter Benjamin and his conception of the dialectical image (326) – but, without the rigorous and sustained analysis of

this philosophical conjunction, we are left with impressions that collide with a myriad of theoretical positions without committing to any one of them.

This brings us to the question of the concept of time implicated by *Nachleben*. Survivals, leaps, crises and discontinuities do not essentially displace the form of chronology – in fact, one could argue that they remain bound to it for their effects. The historian’s ‘alternative’ between chronology and anachronism is not one that in itself rejects the presumptions of historical study. For Didi-Huberman to develop a theory of time that convincingly displaces chronology he would have had to synthesise his scattered readings of Freud, Bergson, Nietzsche and Deleuze – which he does not.

Perhaps it is this lack of an alternative concept of time that ultimately results in the re-historicisation of Warburg within the history of ideas. Didi-Huberman claims that Warburg is a man for our time, but he makes sense of him through the intellectual breakthroughs of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Insofar as he indicates that strong art historiography and art history is always an anachronistic enterprise, might it not have been productive to see how Warburg sits within and brings new light to our intellectual milieu; in particular, how his own philosophy of displacement, dynamism and mobilisation finds resonance and mutual amplification with 20th century philosophies of difference? The suggestive mentions of Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze, Benjamin are passed over too quickly - it is these conjunctions that one would like to see developed. Without them, Warburg persists as the ‘man of the 19th century’ that Gombrich - mistakenly, in Didi-Huberman’s view - classified him as (35).

Nevertheless, Didi-Huberman’s work continues to set the standard for a philosophical art history. Today, when ‘interdisciplinary’ has become the new, lazy catchphrase of our times and the study of images has become a vast and almost meaningless enterprise, here is a thinker who reminds us of the disciplinary histories which could be guiding such evaluations,

offering a concept of image that permits us to make critical distinctions with respect to the field of the visual. Thus he shows how the work of Warburg could not be timelier, in the untimely sense of resisting identification with the current age to offer critique of it. *The Surviving Image* exposes the most salient meaning of interdisciplinarity as an ever-changing, irreducible space of thinking, as a practice that does not simply bring new analogies between disciplines in their existing states but creates something new from the interval between disciplines - ‘a domain of thought that we are not yet thinking about’ (in Merleau-Ponty’s words, 303), or what Giorgio Agamben perspicaciously called, referring to Warburg’s work, a ‘discipline with no name’ (16). Didi-Huberman concludes his book with the remark that ‘in every age, indeed in every moment, art history needs to be reread and begun anew’ (339) - and certainly this is a book whose re-readings must surely provoke new beginnings.

ⁱ Kurt Foster, in Aby Warburg *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, Los Angeles, 1999, 4.

ⁱⁱ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, London, 2001, 298